

GURBANI SANGIT: AUTHENTICITY AND INFLUENCES

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A study of the Sikh musical tradition in relation to medieval and early modern Indian music

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This paper is part of a wider academic research, which aims to locate the Sikh musical tradition (Gurbani sangit)¹ in the context of the medieval and early modern history of Indian music. In particular, this script focuses on kirtan, a genre of Gurbani sangit that entails the singing of the Sikh sacred hymns as a core part of the spiritual practice. Compared with other musical genres in vogue during the Sikh Gurus' era (late fifteenth-early eighteenth century CE), Gurbani kirtan has been either neglected by past scholars, or, in more recent times, considered a subaltern expression of the better-known classical (darbari dhrupad and khayal) forms. Through the analysis of a coherent corpus of compositions set to peculiar ragas (modal melodies) and talas (rhythmic cycles), the present contribution explores the idea of an autonomous identity of the Sikh music tradition, suggesting that Gurbani kirtan evolved not as a stylistic variation of other coeval forms, but as a distinct genre with peculiar features that fit the Sikh philosophy, literature and devotional context.

Gurbani sangit represents one of the oldest living traditions of Indian music. Music performance associated with spiritual practice has been witnessed since the beginning of Sikh history, when Guru Nanak (1469–1539) set 974 hymns to 19 ragas (modal melodies), with the accompaniment of Bhai Mardana's rabab. Guru Nanak's repertoire laid the foundation of Gurbani kirtan, a genre based on the Guru's banī (the Master's word) 'whose function is to instruct and transform the self-ego of the reader/listener' (Mandair 2009, 359). The performance of Gurbani kirtan is internally woven with the spiritual nature and function of the hymns, and is totally dependent upon the devotional context of the event. In the early

seventeenth century, the fifth master Guru Arjan (1563–1606) collected in the Adi Granth about 5800 hymns composed by himself, his 4 predecessors, and 15 selected medieval mystics from the Sant, Sufi, and bhakti traditions.² In 1604, with the installation of the Adi Granth at the Sri Darbar Sahib (nowadays popularly known as the Golden Temple) in Amritsar, Guru Arjan established and formalized the practice of kirtan, organizing the sonic ceremony in eight sessions (chaunkis), performed daily at the Sikh holy shrine (Singh 2006).³ Since Guru Arjan's time the holy book constitutes an essential source for the musical and spiritual practice of the Sikh community, not only at the Sri Darbar Sahib and in any Sikh temple, but also in the domestic context. A later version of the holy book, known as the Sri Guru Granth Sahib (henceforth SGGS), was compiled at the beginning of the eighteenth century by the 10th Sikh master Guru Gobind Singh (1666–1708), who included in the collection 115 hymns of the ninth master Guru Tegh Bahadur (1621–1675). In both versions of the holy book, the hymns (or sabads) are indexed according to 31 ragas⁴ and their varieties. Although the musical criterion used to subdivide the SGGS shows that the hymns and their sonic dimension are strictly intertwined, the Sikh music repertoire has never been the object of musicological studies until recently. No clear reference of Gurbani kirtan is in fact found in the musical treatises compiled by Sanskrit and Persian writers between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, nor is there any mention in recent publications of Indian music history.⁵ In a recent work, Khalsa (2012) discusses the surge of a so-defined Sikh musical renaissance⁶ that, in the early 1990s, led native scholars to promote initiatives focused on the study of the Sikh musical repertoire. This movement gave the start to a new field of study called Sikh Musicology, which aims to locate the history and analysis of Gurbani sangit among the South Asian musical traditions.⁷

It needs to be noted that, until the twentieth century, the medieval⁸ and early modern Gurbani repertoire had been transmitted orally, either by professional musicians who performed refined versions of the hymns, or by members of the Sikh congregation

who sang in a ‘plain’ style. But over time, Sikh kirtan incorporated influences from other traditions, including Western music. In the span of a few generations, these ‘musical loans’ dramatically affected the Sikh repertoire, and nowadays, the holy hymns are rendered in such a great variety of musical idioms and arrangements that there appears to be a lack of historicity and consistency (Van der Linden 2011; Kaur 2011; Khalsa 2012). In the quite confusing contemporary scenario, we shall however distinguish the repertoire of medieval and early modern Gurbani sangit from newer forms, that for the sake of clarity I gather here under the general umbrella of Gurmat sangit (see note 1), in which the only element remaining to distinguish the performance of the Sikh hymns from other genres of Indian music is the central role of the holy scriptures, or sabad.

As is unanimously accepted by scholars and kirtanie (kirtan professional singers⁹), the Sikh Gurus’ repertoire is primarily word oriented (sabad pradhan), and the musical performance of the hymns is subjugated to the text. In the Sri Guru Granth Sahib, each hymn indicates both its author and the name of the raga in which the text was originally set, and yet there are ‘apparently’ no musical directions to suggest the rhythm,¹⁰ or indications that would enable scholars and musicians to identify a specific style of performance.¹¹ The oral transmission of the ancient compositions is one of the most problematic issues. Music notation was known in India since the seventh century CE (Widness 1996), but has been introduced into Sikh kirtan pedagogy only in recent times, with the adoption of the modern system created by V.N. Bhatkhande at the beginning of the twentieth century. This notation system entails a method that conformed different genres of North Indian music to a standard idiom basis, also known as Hindustani Sangit Paddhati.¹² It should be noted that – with the exception of the medieval and early modern Gurbani repertoire transmitted within lineage of reputed families of kirtanie – most of the Sikh repertoire notated and taught according to Bhatkhande’s system, consists of new compositions,¹³ inspired by instruments and forms of Indian music not extant during the Sikh Gurus’ era. While I recognize the importance of synchronic analysis to

cover the study of the Sikh kirtan forms practiced in the present day, I would like to reinforce the importance of a diachronic approach that provides the tradition with a historical depth. In this paper, I will draw a scenario of medieval and early modern Indian music where the Gurbani kirtan, as practiced during the Sikh Gurus' era, should be properly located. This study will reveal that the uniqueness and strength of the ancient Gurbani music repertoire stand not only in the subdivision of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib based on the 31 ragas, but also in the peculiar idiom and forms complementary to the holy scripts.

Previous studies

From a historical and musicological perspective, one of the first studies was attempted by Ajit Singh Paintal for his doctoral thesis in 1971. Part of this work was later published in a book chapter entitled The contribution of ragis and rababis to the Sikh devotional music (1978). Here, Paintal drew the outlines of the tradition, identifying two major types of repertoire associated with Gurbani music: (i) kirtans based on folk tunes and (ii) sabad ritas analogous to the classical dhrupad and khyl compositions. According to Paintal, the first category represents the original form of kirtan practice based on what he defined the dharna or folk melodic repertoire. Set on 'common ragas', this is a sabad pradhan kirtan form, in which the text predominates over the music. The performance does not require technicalities and, therefore, is apt for mass singing. Here, the rahao (lit. 'pause', musically functioning as refrain) is sung by the sangat (congregation), whereas the stanzas are rendered by the ragi and his jatha. Within the category of this folk style kirtan, Paintal also includes a form called jyotian-de-sabad, based on 'some traditional plain-song style [...] sung in simple notes', and meant for congregational singing only. In the author's opinion, this event is equivalent to some devotional songs performed in Bengal or Madhyades, and 'it is the common heritage of kirtan, which every Sikh possesses today'.

Because for the masses these tunes are quite easy to be sung, therefore they are the most popular and appealing style of kirtan in today's Sikh Devotional music. (1978, 259)

At its opposite, the form that Paintal described with the term sabad rit is a solo performance based on the classical music model, with particular reference to dhrupad.

During the times of the various Sikh Gurus, the form of Sikh devotional music was based purely on the dhrupad style of Hindustani classical music. As the dhrupad style of composition was most popular during those days, the Sikh Ragis and Rababis also took to this style of singing and composed innumerable sabads from the Guru Granth based on the dhrupad style. This was the time when in most of the Hindu temples of Dwarka, Ayodhya, Mathura, Vrindavan, Pashupatinath (Kashi), and Nathdwara (Udaipur), temple musicians also adopted the same style and sang visnupadas based on dhrupad. From the 15th to the end of the 17th century, the dhrupad style of kirtan also became popular in the Sikh gurdwaras. The Ragis and the Rababis used to perform kirtan to the accompaniment of mridanga or pakhawaj, as was done by other musicians in singing dhrupad of the classical style. (1978, 258)

Paintal maintained that the sabad rit repertoire constitutes 'the most important of the melodic group of compositions' (1978, 259). In his analysis, since the Gurus' time, the sabad rit were performed only by a class of professional musicians (ragis and rababis¹⁴) who cultivated their voices. Their renditions were characterized by an emphasis on musical features (peculiar vocal techniques, ornamentations, talas, ragas), and 'it is only through the sabad rit that many rare ragas have been preserved and kept alive'. In the same article, Paintal affirmed that while dhrupad was practiced during the Sikh Gurus' era, when khyal became popular, 'the Sikh Ragis and Rababis also took this style and composed many sabads on the Guru Granth in khyal style' (1978, 259). The information that Paintal reported in this early work was based

on a long-term ethnographic research held between the mid-1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. At that time, he interviewed a large number of the old generation ragis and rababis, who still retained the memory of the Gurbani kirtan tradition and its peculiar idiom as practiced before Partition (1947). Yet, not coming from a traditional family of kirtanie, he was analyzing the repertoire through the lens of the standard education in classical music. A criticism of Paintal's approach comes from Bhai Baldeep Singh, the 13th generation kirtania and scholar (see note 6), in regard to the definition of dharna. According to the kirtania, the general meaning of the term dharna is tune, and it could refer to any form of music (folk and classical), whereas the tradition would distinguish between siddhi dharna and sabad rit di dharna.

This discourse is not known to (classical) musicians and musicologists, because they are not memory bearers. Their understanding, perception and inferences are of a different kind. Siddhi dharna is the cultural expression of a community, a fruit of a civilization. After centuries and centuries, a melody is formed and known by every-body. Simplicity is attained after a long time and so is dharna. Sabad rit di dharna, instead, are the result of an individual effort, not a collective musical harvest.¹⁵

This clarification brings the focus on the authorship of compositions. While the siddhi dharna repertoire is based on pre-extant folk songs (that maybe simple or very complex), the sabad rit are compositions authored either by the Sikh Gurus or by musicians belonging to the tradition. In this regard, in one of his last interviews, Paintal showed a sort of wariness. As testified in Khalsa's work, the scholar completely denied the original contribution of the Sikh Gurus and the ragis to the construction of the Gurbani kirtan repertoire.

Gurus were not musicians, so they have not given the forms of the ragas [in the Guru Granth Sahib], they just mention the names of the ragas... Neither the musicians, [nor] the Ragis were competent, they just inherited singing and learnt Gurbani, and whatever you used to

hear, from the seniors, they would copy it, knowingly or unknowingly, they sang them. (Khalsa 2012, 213)

Compared to his first study, over the years Paintal's standpoint seems to have changed, thoroughly following the paradigm established in the Indian academia after Bhatkhande's musical reform.¹⁶ This approach presents at least two hurdles when applied to the study of the Sikh Gurus' repertoire. First, Bhatkhande's system cannot be taken as a parameter for studying traditions that historically pre-date it. Second, it is incongruous to use classical music as a reference for studying traditions that are expressions of a diverse culture and context. Doing so would create a hierarchy or a dichotomy between categories (i.e. devotional versus classical, etc.). Within this given scenario, native scholars and musicians often refer to the Hindustani classical influence on the Sikh kirtan, adopting an inappropriate vocabulary that generates more confusion than clarity. For instance, the terms genre and style are used as if they were synonyms (we have styles within a broader category of a genre). Thus, my work focuses on Gurbanī sangit as a medieval and early modern musical idiom, on whose base the ancient (or puratan) kirtan is performed as a genre, with peculiar features that fit the poetical construction of the Gurus' bani (word) and its message.

Diachronic and synchronic approaches

For the study of Gurbanī kirtan, I propose a double approach that combines the diachronic with the synchronic analysis. In this perspective, the musical analysis of the repertoire transmitted to the present day, within a few families of old generation ragis and rababis, is intertwined with information from written and oral sources. Although oral traditions are susceptible to changes over time, a sort of continuity can in fact be observed within the lineages of traditional Indian musicians (Neuman 1980; Thielemann 1997; Cassio 2000; Sanyal and Widdess 2004). As Qureshi points out, historicity depends on the 'capacity' and the 'motivation' for a tradition to be transmitted.

Capacity in oral tradition is essentially linked to memory. While memory of past generations cannot be measured, there is diverse but not unreasonable indication that the presence of a stable chain of transmission set within a social monitoring unit such as a professional lineage is favorable to oral knowledge being handed down through generations with a minimum of distortion. The crucial element is that of motivation: for what knowledge is such preservation essential? (1993, 112)

In the case of musical repertoires connected with religious practices, motivation is inherent in the transmission of the spiritual and cultural heritage. A break in the tradition could be due to socio-political situations, as happened with Gurbani kirtan after 1947. As will be discussed further in this work, I argue that through a systematic and slow cultural violence, the original form and idiom of the medieval Gurbani musical tradition has been replaced with a modern national tradition, as part of a political agenda aiming to weaken ethnic and religious minorities.

The question of historicity brought about by Qureshi evokes the controversial notion of 'authenticity' that, in relation to the Sikh kirtan, has been extensively debated by Van der Linden (2008, 2011, 2013), Singh (2011), and Khalsa (2012). While I redirect the reader to their works, I would remind that, in a broader perspective, this is not a new issue in the field of music. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the Western 'Early music movement' encouraged a discussion of authenticity in music,¹⁷ introducing terms such as 'historically informed', 'historically aware', and 'period' instruments in relation to the study of ancient musical practices.¹⁸ The basic idea here is that repertoires of a certain epoch should be performed with instruments belonging to that specific historical period. On the other hand, each instrument is designed to be played with a peculiar performing technique, with specific values that cannot be transposed to another instrument. This is particularly true for oral traditions in which original

instruments and their playing techniques have been preserved. For instance, pakhawaj and tabla are drums distinguished not only on the basis of their different shapes, but more so for their diverse playing techniques and rhythmic repertoires, which refer to specific periods, genres and esthetics of Indian music. Compared with tabla, medieval instruments such as pakhawaj ([figure 1](#)) and jori-pakhawaj ([figure 2](#)) not only represent a tangible heritage of the past Sikh tradition, but these drums



Figure 1. Pakhawaj (photograph by the author).



Figure 2. Jori – pakhawaj (photograph by Bhai Baldeep Singh).

'speak' a peculiar musical idiom. In this regard, the synchronic model I suggest for the musicological analysis focuses as well on the structure of the rhythmic compositions based on the pakhawaj and jori-pakhawaj techniques as transmitted within one of the oldest lineages of Sikh musicians. Rhythmic (and melodic) compositions in fact contain the essence of the musical grammar, providing important information about the medieval musical system. Analogous to the analysis of spoken languages, we may infer the grammar of a musical tradition from the construction of the musical discourse. In the old school of linguistics and semiotics, this analytical process is based on the concepts of langue and parole as defined by De Saussure (1916). The term langue stands for the shared idiom as an abstract system of language, and parole represents the individual linguistic act based on the (implicit or explicit) langue. In other words, just as any speech is based on linguistic rules, similarly a musical composition is based on an (implicit or explicit) musical system. Since the 1970s, semiology has also been successfully applied to the study of Western and non-Western musical repertoires, revealing their logic and their immanent structures. One of the pioneering scholars in this field is Jean Jacques Nattiez who, in his 'Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music' (1990), suggests a threefold analytical model for the study of music cultures and their idioms. In this paper, I have applied this threefold approach, which involves the following: (i) the musical corpus (data), (ii) the metamusical discourse or the native discourses on music (treatises and interviews),¹⁹ and (iii) the reconstruction of the indigenous system of thought and repertoire done by the scholars, combining the data and their interpretations (Nattiez 1990, 188).²⁰ Modern criticism of Nattiez's work points out the lack of cultural and historical interpretations, questioning to what extent the analysis of the immanent musical structures could be neutral and not determined by the scholar's perspective. While I still find Nattiez's method a valid heuristic tool for the study of the semantic level of Gurani music, I propose, on the other hand, to weave the analysis of the musical structures with the study of the cultural, religious, and historical instances that have generated the Sikh kirtan repertoire and its changes over time.

Metamusical discourses: dhrupad versus dhurpad

To begin with, I would like to examine the metamusical discourses that appear in the Sanskrit treatises and Indo-Persian sources, in order to locate the early Gurbani sangit and the performance of kirtan within the debate on medieval music, according to the indigenous categories.

The history of Indian music presents a large number of written sources on native musical theory, esthetics, and practices of the past. One of the most important is the Brhaddesi of Matangamuni, written in the ninth century AD (or little later according to Sarmadee 2003, 141). In this treatise, the author establishes a dichotomy between the categories of marga (old religious genres) and desi (a new regional forms of music). As Lewis Rowell, one of the major scholars of medieval Indian music clarifies:

In a final attempt to bring the contrast between the domains of Marga and Desi into clearer focus, the following clusters of meanings may be useful: Marga is the ritual music, primarily sacred, strict, classical, in Sanskrit. A central tradition melody based on the jatis and gramaragas.

Desi is entertaining music (gana) primarily secular, free, vernacular, both Sanskrit and provincial languages, regional traditions, melodic basis expanded to include the bhasa and desi ragas. (Rowell 1987, 140)

The Brhaddesi actually ratifies the passage from the early toward the medieval musical era. Right at the end of the treatise, Matangamuni describes in detail a new desi song form, known as prabandha. Prabandhas 'are metrical, sectional, ornamental highly varied in style, and feature elaborate poetic diction' (Rowell 1987, 137). Beyond the structure, the prabandhas were based on specific regional traditions in terms of raga, tala, and poetic meter. Rowell views the prabandhas as the 'microcosm of the world of medieval Indian song' (1987, 148). Prabandhas did not survive as a formal genre in the contemporary

tradition, but according to the late Indian musicologist Premlata Sharma, 'the basic elements of this concept are still alive in our actual practice, although they are not recognized as such'.²¹

Contemporary scholars have seen in the prabandha a stanzaic musical structure later adopted to perform vernacular religious music. According to Sanyal and Widdess, the dhruva-prabandha described in the Sangitratnakara (thirteenth century) 'is likely to be the most relevant early form for the history of dhrupad' (2004, 232–234).

The evidence of the Sangita-ratnakara thus suggests that certain elements of the musical organization of dhrupad compositions were already current before the emergence of dhrupad as such. The most significant of these elements were a fixed pattern of registrally contrasted melodic units, low-high-low-high; a structure of three formal sections, of which the third is similar in construction to the first and second combined; and a cyclic format with antecedent refrain, whereby the opening segment of the song returns at the close (and possibly between the other sections).

(Sanyal and Widdess 2004, 234)

Srivastava (1980) has seen in the prabandha a stanzaic musical structure, which was later adopted in a simplified version²² to perform vernacular religious music, such as the haveli dhrupads of the Vaisnava tradition of Madhyades. Apparently, prabandha disappeared by the fifteenth century, assimilated into the new genre called dhrupad.

By the about the 15th century when the prabandhas became too stereotyped and effete and as such lost their popular appeal, then a simplified derivation of prabandhas emerged in the form of dhrupad. The prabandhas then began to be referred to be as marga. Designation of prabandha as marga is a reflection of the process of its deification. (Srivastava 1980, 8)

The early dhruva-prabhandas performed in Madhyades in the fifteenth century are also known as Visnu-padas, poetical compositions in honor of

the god Visnu. They constitute the repertoire of the still extant haveli dhrupad of the Vallabha Sampradaya, one of the main Vaisnava congregations, and they are regarded as the earliest form of dhrupad known today. Within the Vaisnava tradition, Swami Haridas (1480–1575) is considered the legendary saint and author of many padas (poetic compositions set to music), which were later incorporated into the darbari (court) dhrupad tradition.

Structurally, the devotional dhrupada is largely identical with the classical dhrupada. It can be argued whether and to what extent the classical dhrupada has its origin in the traditional Vaisnava temple music. (Thielemann 1997, 8)

In contrast to the dhrupad performed in the royal context, Thielemann also explains that the devotional dhrupads of the Vallabha Sampradaya served the worship of God, rather than being a form of worldly entertainment. Their esthetic values did not change over the centuries, as the haveli dhrupads constitute an integral part of the congregational repertoires (samajagayana), and today represent a coherent and authentic expression of the medieval Vaisnava tradition of Vraj. The haveli (temple) dhrupad documented by Thielemann is a case study particularly close to the Gurbani Sangit repertoire. A fruitful comparison will show interesting analogies in terms of the musical function and the structure of the songs.

Devotional dhrupadas are characterized by pada pradhana, i.e. predominance of the poetic word of the verse (pada) overall other components of the musical presentation. The chief aspect of Vaisnava dhrupada is its bhava, its underlying mood and the sentiments evoked through the words and the sacred content of the text. (Thielemann 1997, 31)

The later development of the dhruva prabandha and the visnu-pada into its court (classical) counterpart is evidenced in the Manakutuhala, written at the beginning of the sixteenth century by the ruler of Gwalior, Raja Man Singh Tomar (1486–1517). In the text (preserved only in the Persian

source Tarjuma-i-Manakutuhala translated and edited in 1666 by Faqirullah), it is reported that dhrupad was largely popular in the region at that time, and that the ruler of Gwalior, with the help of expert musicians (nayaks), shaped the genre into the classical darbari form.

Dhrupada it has been an invention brought about Raja Man Gwaliari. It comprises four song parts, and is equally open to all the nine rasas. Verily, the Raja formulated this darling of the populace and the elite alike, with the co-ordination of Nayak Bakshu and Nayak Bhinnu, together with Mahmud and Karana and Lohanka. Moreover, they gave it a finish and imparted to it an appeal which surpassed that of the prevailing song- forms. [...] ²³ The people of Sudesa, sing it (dhrupada) in the desavali dialect. [...] Dhrupada is self-sufficient. It has imbibed all from every song form including the margi; with the result that it has managed to grow into a marvel of the age. (Faqirullah [Engl. transl.] [\[1666\]1996](#), 97)

In the context of the medieval court culture of Madhyades, dhrupad became the genre of classical music, which had in Miyan Tansen (1506–1586) its legendary exponent. Cred- ited to be Swami Haridas' disciple, Tansen started his career as a court musician in Gwalior, absorbing the early dhrupad tradition, and by the end of the sixteenth century he became the favorite musician at the court of the Mughal emperor Akbar (1556–1605). After Tansen, four banis (vocal styles) of dhrupad developed, namely the Gaurhar bani, Nauhar bani, Khandar bani, and Dagar bani, giving the start to the clas- sical court tradition that, according to Sanyal and Widdess ([2004](#)), has influenced the origin of the present day 'regional' dhrupad traditions. Among those, the Talwandi gharana²⁴ of the Panjab is considered to have inherited the Khandar bani style, and to be the source of the Sikh dhrupad tradition.

Before Partition, dhrupad was a popular art-form for which members of the Talwandi gharana were particularly noted. It is said that they were employed by Sikh religious leaders to compose music in the dhrupad style for ritual use in the temple of Amritsar and elsewhere. [...] Thus

music of ultimately Hindu origins was adapted by Muslims for use in Sikh rituals. (Sanyal and Widdess 2004, 33) [underscoring mine]

This thesis maintained by Sanyal and Widdess appears in a well-documented study on classical dhrupad, yet the information about the Sikh Gurus' music tradition is not supported by direct sources and musicological analysis of the Gurbani repertoire. Sanyal and Widdess' statement relegates Gurbani kirtan to a subaltern category of classical music that does not reflect the nature of Sikh literature, its historical breadth, and its spiritual context. A detailed study of Gurbani sangit will rather contribute to drawing a wider, and perhaps more complex, scenario of the medieval Indian music, in which the Sikh Gurus' tradition played an important (and yet undiscovered) role.

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From the oral repertoire transmitted within the lineages of Sikh ragis and rababis, we learn that the ancient compositions are structured in a fourfold dhrupad form. It should be noted that the term dhrupad not only refers to the medieval genre but it primarily indicates the structure of a musical and poetic composition subdivided into four parts, called asthai, antara, sancari, and abhog. These four sections are set in a logical sequence that progressively unfolds the meaning of the text through the development of the melody. Dhrupad compositions are set to specific rhythmic cycles, generally played at a (slow or medium) tempo that allows the singer to render the words in a clear manner.

As reported by Srivastava and Thielemann, the haveli repertoire of the Vaisnavas appears to be the oldest living dhrupad tradition. But the timeline comparison of the Gurbani, haveli, and darbari musics (figure 3) shows that among the three traditions Gurbani sangit could be the first one to have been established. Swami Haridas (1480–1575) was in fact a contemporary of the third Sikh master Guru Amardas (1479–1574, author of 907 hymns), while the legendary dhrupad singer Tansen (1506–1586) lived in the same span of time as the fourth and fifth Sikh masters, Guru Ram Das (1534–1581) and Guru Arjan (1563–1606),

who, respectively, authored 688 and 2218 hymns, collected since 1604 in the Adi Granth.

These facts bring us to hypothesize that during the Sikh Gurus' era the hymns were sung in a form of early dhrupad which evolved a little earlier than the havelī and darbarī traditions. In the A'in-i-Akbarī (the official chronicle of the reign of Akbar), we find an interesting mention in support of the theory that dhrupad was practiced in Panjab at the time of the first five Sikh Gurus, prior to the development of the four banis. In 1590 Abu'l-Fazl (1551–1602), the vizier of the Moghul emperor Akbar, wrote:

Dhurpad consists of four rhythmical lines without any definite prosodic length of words or syllables. [...] The kalants or more commonly kalavants or bards are

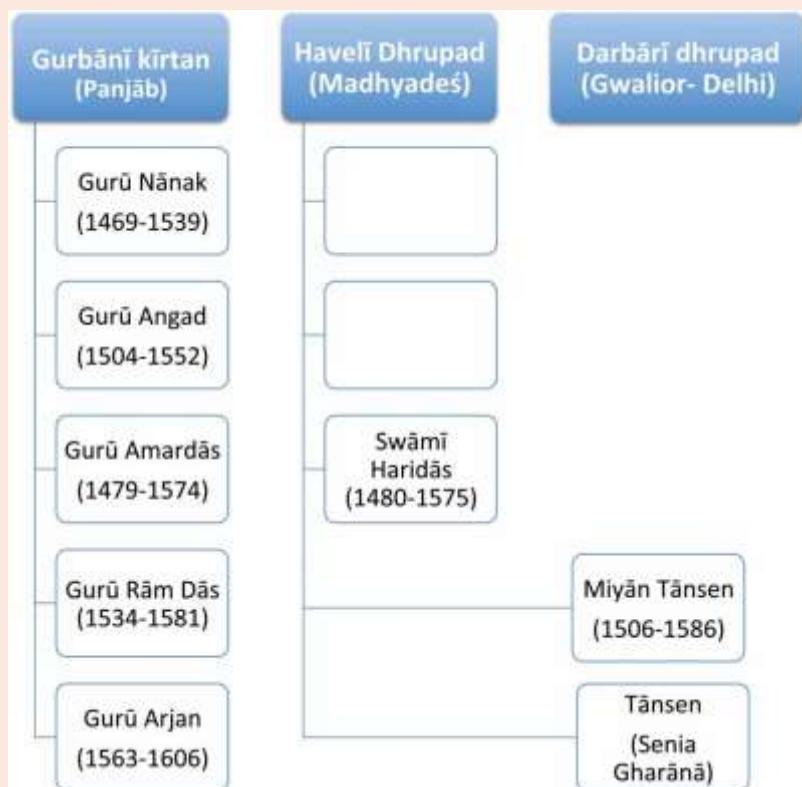


Figure 3. Time line comparison of the Gurbani kirtan (dhrupad-based), haveli and darbari dhrupad, showing that among the three genres, Gurbani kirtan may be the first to have been established.

well known, and sing the dhurpad. The dhadhi's are the Punjabi singers who play upon the Dhaddha and the Kingara. They chiefly chant the praises of the heroes on the field of battle and lend fresh spirit to the fight.

Dhadhi women chiefly play on the daf and the duhul, and sing the dhurpad and the sohla on occasions of nuptial and birthday festivities in a very accomplished manner. Formerly they appeared only before assemblies of women but now before audiences of men. (Abu'l-Fazl-Allami [Engl. Transl.] [1907](#), 256) [underscoring mine]

Abu'l-Fazl refers to the genre as 'dhurpad', in place of the spelling 'dhrupad', generally found in the music literature. We may wonder whether we have here an identical form with two different names, or rather two diverse genres. Most contemporary scholars agree that the origin of the word dhrupad derives from the Sanskrit expression dhruva-pada, meaning a composition based on a fixed (dhruva) and repeated metrical structure or verse (pada), derived from the pre-medieval prabhanda. According to Sanyal and Widdess ([2004](#)), in the Panjabī and Urdu speaking cultural contexts, this genre is known by a slightly different vernacular pronunciation as 'dhurpad', which identifies a regional style of the classical form. In the opinion of Bhai Baldeep Singh, the etymology of the word shows instead a deeper philosophical and spiritual insight that better fits the Gurbani sangit ideology and original music idiom. Similar to the concept of the Visnu-pada of the Vaisnava tradition, the term dhurpad may be in fact derived from the expression Dhur-pada, meaning the verses (pade) 'of the Dhur (the origin of all existing things, hence the Creator). In order to explain this concept, in a recent interview Bhai Baldeep Singh²⁵ mentioned the following

verse from a hymn composed by Guru Arjan in raga Sorath (SGGS, 628):

ਧੁਰ ਕੀ ਬਾਣੀ ਆਈ॥
ਤਿਨ ਸਗਲੀ ਚਿੰਤ ਮਿਟਾਈ॥
Dhur ki bani ai
Tin sagli chint mitai.

This could be translated as: 'The divine Word of the Creator came, it eradicated all worries'. The element that Bhai Baldeep Singh aims to bring into the analysis of the medieval repertoire is the concept of the pada as an archetypal genre, where the pre-fix dhur designates the nature of the composition.

The words dhrupad and dhurpad are not used in the bani, whereas dhur-ki-bani (which may also be read as dhur-ke -pade or simply dhurpad) is used to refer to the whole of Gurbani. The term pade is used to refer to the singing form, which is distinct from the ancient system of chantt singing. Unlike chantt singing, pade singing had a refrain. (Singh 2011, 293)

Bhai Baldeep Singh's interpretation of the word dhur-pada reflects the philosophy that stands behind the repertoire, supported by a specific music idiom. The spiritual character of the Gurbani tradition has been well described by the Indian musicologist K.S. Saxena, in one of his last interviews²⁶:

Gurbani Sangit is quite different from other kinds of music, for the simple reason that Gurbani sangit has not been practiced by ordinary individuals, but by people who had an intense spiritual life. And that brings somehow some quality in music, which we do not ordinarily find.

Saxena highlighted the distinctive character of the Sikh music repertoire, in contrast with the darbari music developed in the court tradition, where

the economic and artistic aspects had an effect on the actual performance and its esthetics. But the meaning of the sentence Dhur ki bani not only denotes a general spiritual nature of the Sikh musical repertoire, as it also refers to deeper philosophical implications peculiar to the Sikh ideology. While Inderjit Nilu Kaur argues that the term dhrupad does not appear in the early Sikh literature,²⁷ the hypothesis that Gurbani kirtan was performed in a dhrupad form is mainly corroborated by the musical corpus of compositions transmitted within the old kirtaniye's lineage,²⁸ and by the use of peculiar instruments such as the dhrupadi rabab and the pakhawaj. Like other medieval music traditions, Gurbani sangit has been preserved within a few families of performers. Applying the idea of gharana borrowed from the darbari tradition, Sikh scholars recently theorized that, over times, different schools (taksals) of kirtanies emerged, each one representing a specific style of singing. On the contrary, ragis coming from the old tradition always affirmed that there is only one taksal, the Sikh Gurus' school.²⁹ Aiming to identify and re-establish the original music compositions from the Sikh Gurus' time, in 1968 the Punjabi University of Patiala set up a special committee led by Prof. Taran Singh. After taking into consideration the repertoires sung by some of the most important Gurbani exponents of the time, the committee declared that the compositions sung by Bhai Avtar Singh (1925–2006) and Bhai Gurcharan Singh (1915–, figure 4), the sons of the legendary singer Bhai Jwala Singh (1876–1952), represented the authentic repertoire sung in the court of the Sikh Gurus (Singh and Singh 1979, xii; Singh 2011, 281). Interestingly, most of the sabad ritas performed by the two brothers Bhai Avtar Singh and Bhai Gurcharan Singh are formally dhrupads. Interviewed in this regard, Bhai Gurcharan Singh recently maintained:

Gurbani sangit is sabad pradhan (word oriented). The function of music is to support the lyrics. The foundation of Gurba ni k i r tan is dhr upad. After that came khyal, characterized by vocal ornamentation, such as tan-s and paltas, which is to be avoided in Gurbani. Alap is allowed, but the showing off of musical ability is against the tradition. [...] If one has the ability to

sing dhrupad, that is the best and it should be done. But otherwise a person may adopt another form, since the main thing is the Gurbanī (scripture).³⁰ [underscoring mine]



Figure 4. Bhai Gurcharan Singh (in the center) accompanied by Parminder Singh Bhamra playing jori-pakhawaj (on the right). New Delhi, April 2011 (photograph by the author).

While the old ragi maintained that Gurbanī kirtan is dhrupad-based, on the other hand he affirmed that Sikh hymns may actually be rendered in diverse forms, depending on the vocal skills and background of the performer. And he pointed out that, in any case, the Sikh kirtan rendition should be word oriented, with no place for showing off virtuosity as a manifestation of the singer's ego.

Most of the ancient melodic compositions, or puratan sabad rit, transmitted in the lineage of Bhai Jwala Singh, follow the four-part structure mentioned earlier and are set to typical dhrupad rhythmic cycles. The variety and complexity of Bhai Jwala Singh's compositions

show an array of ragas and talas peculiar to the medieval and early modern tradition, revealing a repertoire based on an ancient and consistent musical system.

In Indian music, compositions are considered to be an essential part of a living tradition, as they collect the melodic rules of the ragas. Ragas are abstract melodies, and 'an authentic dhurpad composition contains grammatical codes and essential structural features which characterize the raga' (Basra 1996).³¹ The same opinion is shared by Van Der Meer who, quoting the renowned Sikh musician Dilip Chandra Vedi, affirms that:

The true raga-knowledge depended on knowledge of compositions and that a correct unfolding of the raga could only be achieved by using bandish as its model. This view is very much the traditional view of vocalists of the 'old' schools. Dilip Chandra Vedi suggested that the so-called 'new' schools had a limited stock of compositions and that they often knew only fragments of compositions. (Van de Meer 2008, 117)

In contrast with contemporary compositions set to modern genres, the sabad ritas transmitted by Bhai Avtar Singh and Bhai Gurcharan Singh contain the grammar of the medieval music tradition, with precious information about the ancient forms of the ragas and talas, demonstrating the historical depth of the Gurbanī repertoire.

In regard to the melodic repertoire, Bhai Avtar Singh and Bhai Gurcharan Singh's compositions show the structure of rare and old ragas contained in the SGGS not found in any other music tradition. For example, the rendition of raga Shudh Malhar (lit. pure Malhar, also found with the spelling Malar) has peculiar features that distinguish it from the Miyan ki Malhar attributed to Tansen.³² This brings us to think that Shudh Malhar – as preserved in the Gurbanī kirtan tradition – is the original form of Malhar that may pre date Tansen's version.

In the SGGS are also mentioned modal melodies such as Vadhans, Tukhari, Majh, Malī Gaura, and Gauri-Bairagan, which are unique to the Sikh tradition, and in addition, their outlines seem to constitute a unity with the sonic dimension and meaning of their lyrics.

The array of talas, recalled by Bhai Avtar Singh and Bhai Gurcharan Singh, is also particularly rich. It includes 24 different rhythmic cycles, whose peculiar construction is based on the 'grammar' of medieval percussions such as pakhawaj and jori-pakhawaj, the latter credited to having been designed by the fifth master Guru Arjan. As Bhai Gurcharan Singh noted: 'pakhawaj and jori were used when big talas were sung', meaning that the profound and complex dhrupad tal repertoire could only be performed on suitable percussions such as pakhawaj or jori-pakhawaj.

The corpus of music collected by Bhai Avtar Singh and Bhai Gurcharan Singh is an essential testimony of the Gurbani kirtan identity, along with the 'sound' of the particular instruments that fit the sonic values of the past tradition.³³ In relation to instrumental practice, Bhai Gurcharan Singh added an important reference:

In Gurbani kirtan there was no use of sarangi. In kirtan, tanpura was used (but not much), or we played taus and dilruba. I remember that when I used to visit my maternal grandparents in Amritsar, at that time no harmonium was used to perform the Asa di Var at the Sri Harmandar Sahib. There were two accompanists named Labh Singh (saranda player) and Jawar Singh (taus player). But as time went on, they began to play harmonium, and sit by the side (not in a central position). Kirtan was played with string instruments in those earlier times.

Rabab ([figure 5](#)) and pakhawaj are significantly mentioned in the A'in-i-Akbari, as among the instruments in vogue in the sixteenth century, and along with string instruments such as rudra vina, tanpura, and taus ([figure 6](#)), they contributed to creating the sound of medieval music. Research on traditional instruments used in Gurbani kirtan should

necessarily involve considerations about the adequate playing technique and musical esthetics.



Figure 5. Rabab handcrafted by Bhai Baldeep Singh (photograph by Manprit Singh, courtesy by Bhai Baldeep Singh).



Figure 6. The author playing tanpura during a performance accompanied on taus by Nirvair Kaur Khalsa.

New York, April 2014 (photograph courtesy by Hofstra University).

The original Gurbani kirtan form to which Bhai Gurcharan Singh is referring in his interview shares common structural traits with medieval genres, such as the devotional haveli dhrupad of the Vaisnava congregation and the early darbari dhrupad of the courts. When compared with these other two traditions, the Sikh Gurus' repertoire stands in its own uniqueness. The peculiar features that distinguish it make the Gurbani dhrupad-based kirtan not a subaltern expression of the classical dhrupad, but rather an earlier and independent genre, as the corpus of compositions and ragas demonstrates. Furthermore, a comparison between the two forms of (haveli and darbari) dhrupad and the dhrupad form used to perform the Gurbani kirtan may be relevant in order to reconstruct a map of the medieval and early modern musical scenario ([figure 7](#)), which could provide a new perspective to the study of Indian music history.

The khyal form of Gurbani kirtan

Darbari dhrupad became obsolete by the middle of the eighteenth century, when khyal emerged as the predominant genre in the court music scene of North India. Modern scholars maintain that this development had a chain effect on the Sikh kirtan repertoire.

When in the course of time, a different form of classical music became popular, the Sikh Rababis and Ragis also took this style and composed many Shabads of the Guru Granth in the Khyal style. ([Paintal 1978, 258](#))

This thesis presents a number of issues. To begin, khyal is not a style but a genre. In the second place, reducing Gurbani compositions to a copy of more popular and hegemonic forms would reaffirm the dependence of the Sikh Gurus' tradition on the classical (court) genres. Stated that Gurbani kirtan is a sabad pradhan (word oriented) form of music, it is

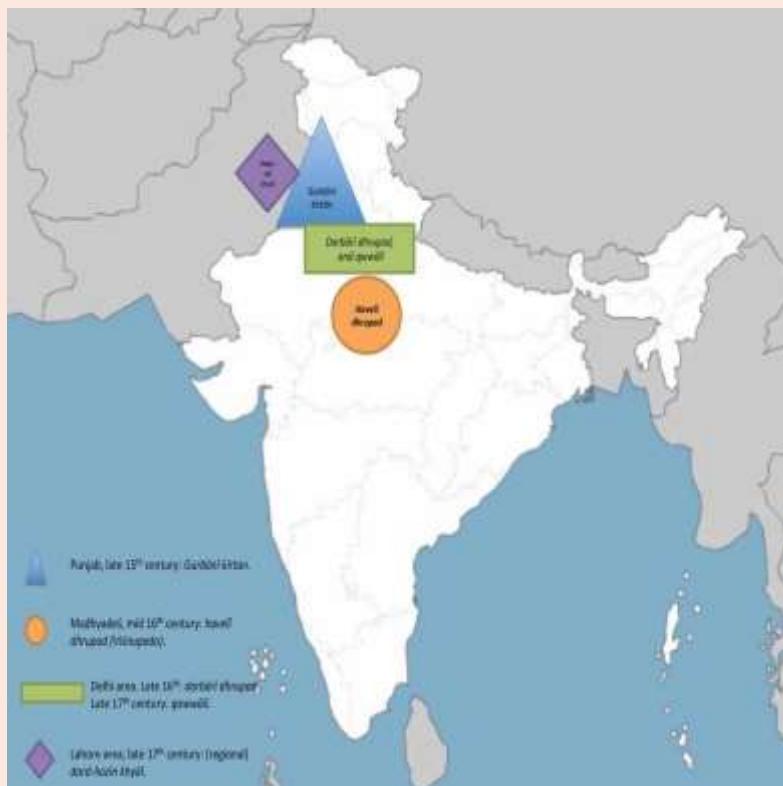


Figure 7. A map showing Gurbani kirtan among other genres, in vogue between the late fifteenth and the late seventeenth century in North West India. of central importance to reflect on whether in the past, the hymns were set to genres borrowed from other traditions (Hindu, Muslim, religious, secular) or rather were original melodic and rhythmic compositions that were shaped on the sabads' poetic structure and meaning (as the dhurpad tradition mentioned above suggests).

Nowadays, most of the so-called 'classical' renditions of the Gurbani hymns present influences derived from a modern form of khayal, with particular regard to the structure of performance, instruments, and vocal mannerism. In this section, I would like to explore the khayal form used in Gurbani music tradition from a different angle. Through a historical overview of the genre, I will argue that the khayal existing at the time of Guru Gobind Singh (late seventeenth–early eighteenth centuries) was not the same form of the classical khayal that we hear today.

In the twentieth century, only few exponents from the old kirtaniye generation remained to testify to the richness and variety of Gurbani tradition, which included both the dhrupad and the khyal musical feature. Among them, Bhai Balbir Singh ([figure 8](#)) is the most senior performer from the Golden Temple. He served as ragi at the Sri Darbar Sahib from 1955 to 1991 and has a huge repertoire of sabad rit.

Bhai Balbir Singh is the oldest son of Bhai Santa Singh, a renowned tabla and pakhawaj player from Taran Taran, and in his youth he received training from extraordinary musicians of the first half of the twentieth century. He received talim in Gurbani sangit from his uncle Bhai Sohan Singh (who was a famous ragi from the Golden Temple), vocal training in dhrupad from legendary Pandit Nathu Ram, in khyal from Pandit Krishna Rao and



Figure 8. Bhai Balbir Singh during the interview in Amritsar, August 2013 (photograph by the author).

Pandit Dilip Chandra Vedi, and in pakhawaj from Bhai Arjan Singh Tarangar, just to name a few. Such privileged training provided Bhai Balbir Singh with a unique array of repertoire, which includes sabad ritas performed in diverse forms ranging from dhrupad to khyal and folk music.

I had the honor of interviewing Bhai Balbir Singh a few times, asking the same questions I have addressed to Bhai Gurcharan Singh about the 'authentic' renditions of Gurbani kirtan repertoire. During a recent meeting, Bhai Balbir Singh acknowledged the masterful dhrupad performances of Bhai Jwala Singh and his two sons, recalling in particular their partial compositions. Somehow resonating with Bhai Gurcharan Singh's opinion, he affirmed:

Gurbani is Gurbani, whichever music you like to sing (to accompany the hymns), sing it. The kirtan we sing today is the same repertoire of the Gurus' time.

We sing what they sang. But in Gurbani nowadays there is everything, dhrupad, khyal, and even 'light' music.³⁴

When he said 'light' music, Bhai Balbir Singh actually meant folk music. And when I asked whether in his opinion khyal was a genre in vogue during the Sikh Gurus' era, he referred to the interpretation of the term ghar as talas (rhythmic cycles) used in dhrupad and in khyal.

Ghar 1, means bada khyal.

Ghar 2, is dadra.

Ghar 3 refers to chota khyal, and

ghar 4 is chartal (dhrupad tal).

Thus dhrupad and khyal existed at the time of the Sikh Gurus.

While Bhai Balbir Singh's thesis about the meaning of ghar has yet to be demonstrated, the history of khyal should be carefully analyzed through written sources.

Khyal is a Persian word often translated as 'imagination', 'fantasy', or 'thought', and the history of this musical genre is connected with both the religious and the secular Muslim culture. In relation to music, the word khyal appeared in written records of the mid seventeenth century, and since then Muslim scholars have attributed the origin of the genre to the Sufi saint Amir Khusrau (1253–1325) of Delhi.³⁵ But there is no evidence that a song form called khyal existed in the medieval period, before the late sixteenth century.

For instance, in his *A'ın-i-Akbarı* (1593), Abu'l-Fazl does not mention khyal among the genres practiced at Akbar's court. The first records of khyal as a musical genre are noted in the following sources: the biography of Baqir Khan Najm-i-Sami (1637),³⁶ the *Padishahnama* of Abdul Hamid Lahawiri (1639), and the *Mırzanama* (1660). However, the most significant testimony is the *Rag Darpana* of Faqırullah (1666), which contains valuable information about musicians, instruments, and genres in vogue during Auran-gazeb's reign (1658–1707).³⁷ As Katherine Butler Brown suggests (2010), we may assume that khyal emerged as a popular genre in the early modern era, between the end of the sixteenth and the middle of the seventeenth century. It should be noted that this was an early form of khyal that had different features from the contemporary genre. In this regard, Miner (1997) and Wade (1984) maintain that the classical form of khyal was developed later, by Ni'mat Khan 'Sadarang'³⁸ in the early eighteenth century, as a genre of entertainment based on mannerism and vocal improvisation at a fast pace. In contrast to Miner's argument, Brown claims that Ni'mat Khan cannot be considered the 'creator' of the classical khyal, but probably was the first known kalawant (classical singer) performing khyal only as a classical genre. In Brown's opinion, the genre was developed in the Sufi community of Barnawa (near Delhi) in the late sixteenth century. The hypothesis that the history of khyal is strongly associated with the Sufi milieu is also supported by Faqırullah. In a chapter about famous musicians of his time, the first two that he

mentions are Sheikh Bahauddin Barnawi and his close disciple, the dervish Sheikh Sher Mohammad. About the first one, Faqirullah writes:

So many of the living melodo-rhythmic cum poetic compositions in the form of Gita, Dhrupada, Khayal, Tarana today are from him. These are really good. Cautukla he did consider to be the most difficult of the song forms. Rabab, Bin and Amirti he handled specially well; had also invented an instrument by the name of Khayal; in shape quite uncommon, although of the stringed variety. (Faqirullah [Engl. transl.] [\[1666\] 1996](#), 191)

About Sheikh Sher Mohammad, Faqirullah recalls that the dervish performed the combined styles of singing chautukla³⁹ and khyal, with particular emphasis on the expression of mystical pathos (dard).

He sung these with a fineness and perfection, beyond which it cannot even be imagined. In Chautukla and Khyal, his compositions are many – all of very high order. [...] The direct appeal to the heart, exciting the emotions of pathos and delightful excitement (dard) which the voice and the tone production of the Sheikh created was entirely his own. (Faqirullah [Engl. transl.] [\[1666\] 1996](#), 193)

The element of dard – that can be better translated as the pain or sense of grief from separation from the Beloved – has a particular importance in the Sufi tradition. This term also appears to be associated with one of the seventeenth forms of khyal described in the Shams al-Aswat, a music treatise written in 1698 by Ras Baras Khan Kalawant. Similarly, in the Ma'rif al-Ar wah (late seventeenth century), the anonymous author defines khyal as a genre based on two, three, or four verses in the Marwari language on the theme of love, whereas cutkula is a 'four-verse genre on the subject of love and the grief of separation sung in the language of Lahore and adjacent areas' (Brown [2010](#), 179).

According to Brown ([2010](#), 185), dard and hazin ('sadness' related to the word huzn, 'grief') are the quintessential esthetic qualities of the

early khyal, associated with Indo-Persian literature, with particular regard to the Sufi milieu. Interestingly, the word hazin is also used by Faqirullah in the description of rabab, which according to the Persian author is a lute with 6 gut-strings, and has from 12 to 18 sympathetic strings in copper or steel. In explaining the reason why this seventeenth century rabab has extra strings, Faqirullah notes:

The advantage is twofold: first, that the gut-strings become slack during the rainy season; but the metallic ones do not. Secondly, that for those who sing Chautukla and Khyal, it is incumbent to do so with a voice laden with pathos (hazin). And a rabab, having extra strings, sounds really soft and pathetic. ([Engl. transl.] [1666] 1996, 125)

The theme of dard and hazin in the musical expression may be particularly significant if associated with the only mention of the word khyal that appears at page 1347 of the Dasam Granth, the text composed by the 10th Sikh master Guru Gobind Singh in the early eighteenth century (Singh and Singh 1999). To introduce the verses **ਮਿੜ ਪਿਆਰੇ ਨੂੰ ਹਾਲ ਮੁਰੀਦਾਂ ਦਾ ਕਿਹਣਾ** (Mitr Piyare Nu Hal Murida Da Kahina), the 10th Sikh master describes his composition as a khyal (**ਖਿਆਲ ਪਾਤਿਸ਼ਾਹੀ ੧੦॥**).

ਮਿੜ ਪਿਆਰੇ ਨੂੰ ਹਾਲ ਮੁਰੀਦਾਂ ਦਾ ਕਿਹਣਾ॥
ਤੁਧੁ ਬਿਨ ਰੋਗੁ ਰਜਾਈਆਂ ਦਾ ਓਢਣ ਨਾਗ ਨਿਵਾਸਾਂ ਦੇ ਰਿਹਣਾ॥
ਸੂਲ ਸੁਰਾਹੀ ਖੰਜਰ ਪਿਆਲਾ ਬਿੰਗ ਕਸਾਈਆਂ ਦਾ ਸਿਹਣਾ॥
ਯਾਰੜੇ ਦਾ ਸਾਨੂੰ ਸੱਥਰ ਚੰਗਾ ਭੱਠ ਖੇੜਿਆਂ ਦਾ ਰਿਹਣਾ॥

Convey to the dear friend the condition of the disciples,
Without Thee, the taking over of quilt is like disease and living in the house
is like living with serpents;
The flask is like the spike, the cup is like a dagger and (the pain of separation)
is like enduring the chopper of the butchers,
The pallet of the beloved Friend is most pleasing and the worldly pleasures
are like furnace.⁴⁰

These are some of most popular verses by Guru Gobind Singh. They were composed after the famous battle of Chamkaur (7 December 1704), where the Guru and his army had been attacked by the Moghul military. The 10th master was able to escape, but two of his sons and all the Sikh army bravely faced martyrdom. According to the tradition, Guru Gobind Singh recited this poem in the Machhivara forest, where he found refuge after the battle. The very touching lyrics focus on the theme of grief and separation from the divine Beloved. Thus, worldly pleasures and human attachments appear as evil (here identified with disease, serpents, spike, dagger, butchers, and furnace), when compared to the love for the Creator, the sole Beloved.

It is still a matter of scholarly discussion whether in that specific literary context 'khyal' had a general meaning (standing for 'thought', for instance) or was a specific musical indication.⁴¹ For a long time I have questioned how, from an esthetic point of view, a profound text like 'Mitr Piyare Nu' could be set on a musical genre associated with the romantic esthetics of the eighteenth century Muslim courts.

The thesis recently proposed by Brown may actually justify Guru Gobind Singh's use of the term khyal from an esthetic and musical standpoint that better suits the meaning of the text, as a dard-hazin song of four verses popular in the region of Lahore in the late seventeenth century.

In conclusion, while a dhrupad-based form was popular in the Gurbanī kirtan repertoire during the first five Gurus' era, khyal appeared only in the early modern tradition.

However, the khyal that was popular in Lahore's region in the late seventeenth century did not have the same esthetics and musical features of the classical genre that will be popularized in the Mughal courts by Ni'mat Khan only in the middle of the eighteenth century. While the context and the function of the old khyal were associated with the Sufi tradition, the classical khyal was practiced in the secular milieu of the

Mughal courts for recreational purposes, and soon also connected with the courtesans' culture. Further academic research may highlight the musical features of the seventeenth century khyal as practiced in the Panjab, with fruitful indications to reconstruct an original version of the Gurbani khyal form.⁴²

As far as the musical structure of classical khyal is concerned, it consists of two brief stanzas (asthai and antara), and their rendition is distinguished by the primacy of musical mannerism and improvisation over words. In its passage from a religious context to the secular, khyal incorporated the romantic (sringar) themes and esthetics of court life. The vocal technique developed fast ornamentation (tans), which often overshadowed the lyrics. The timbre of the instruments adopted to perform classical khyal is distinguished by a bright-sharp sound that seems to echo the spark and scintillating splendor of the Mughal courts. Among the cordophones, we find new instruments such as sitar and sarangi, paired with the sharp percussive sound of the tabla. Since the harmonium was introduced in the nineteenth century, it has become part of the Indian orchestra. The success of this instrument has been due to its fixed tuning, its simple playing technique, and its strong sound that supports the vocal performance.

Compared with the sabad-pradhan form of the havelī dhruvapad (Visnupada) and the Gurbani dhruvapad-based kirtan, the classical khyal is clearly based on music's primacy over the text. It is thus defined as sangit-pradhan, and it represents a case of pure artistry, which by the nineteenth century became the staple of classical North Indian music.

In 1991, a group of renowned Sikh scholars and musicians gathered at Jawaddī Taksal in Ludhiana, to restore the practice of performing the Sikh Gurus' hymns in accordance with the ragas designated in the SGGS. The so-called Raga Nirnayak Committee established a musical reform, not only shaped by Bhatkhande's system, but also taking the esthetics and form of twentieth century classical khyal as its paradigm.⁴³ As a result, most contemporary sabads' renditions are nowadays based on the modern khyal

form, in terms of structure, talas, ragas, instruments and vocal technique, without regard to the medieval and early modern forms in which Gurbani kirtan had been performed during the Sikh Gurus' era.

A comparison with qawwali

According to ancient records and modern studies (Powers, Wade 1984, Miner 1997), the history of early khyal is associated with the Sufi tradition, with particular reference to Amir Khusrau and the practice of qawwali. Qawwali is the expression of the Islamic mysticism practiced by Sufi initiates during the spiritual gathering called 'Mahfil-e sama' (gathering for spiritual listening).⁴⁴ Brown (2010) argues that the present day qawwali is a development of a medieval form called qaul (Arabic word meaning 'utterance'), a devotional genre performed by the qawwals or kawwals (literally 'the singers of a verbal message'). Qaul is still practiced today, as the concluding part of the contemporary qawwali performance (Qureshi 1986, 21). In Takhur Jaiadeva Singh's opinion, qaul is a twofold song form (composed by asthai and antara) with a change of rhythm in the second part of the composition (1995, 121). Remarkably, while in Abu'l-Fazl's account (1593) there is no reference to khyal, the author mentions the kawwals (qaul singers) in the same category as the Punjabi dhadhis, noticing a connection between the two classes of musicians.

The Dhadhis are the Punjabi singers who play upon the Dhadda and the Kingara. They chiefly chant the praises of heroes on the field of battle and lend fresh spirit to the fight. The Kawwals are of this class, but sing mostly after the Delhi and Jaunpur style, and Persian verses in the same manner.

The first time that the word qawwali appears in the Indo-Persian literature is only in 1698, when Ras Baras Khan mentions it in his Shams Al-Aswat as the general term for the music sung by the qawwals. In Brown's analysis (2010, 163), the qawwals may have been the primary exponents of the khyal.

Given the association with khyal and the Panjabī dhadhis mentioned earlier, I would suggest also exploring qaul and qawwali in comparison with the Gurbani kirtan tradition. This study would show some interesting similarities, not only in relation to the function and religious context of the performance, but also in some important correspondences from a musicological standpoint. In her seminal work on qawwali, Qureshi maintains that its present form falls into the category of songs between classical (raga) music and recitation, combining elements from both. All types of songs, including qawwali, thus show the following musical traits:

- (1) music and text are interlinked and fused into one musical whole in which the text is the primary message – as opposed to both raga music, where the music is primary and its verbal delivery entirely subordinate, and recitation, where the text is primary and its musical delivery entirely subordinate;
- (2) the musical form may be strophic or cyclic, depending upon the presence of a refrain, but it always represents the formal structure of the text – as opposed to the extended cyclical forms of raga music;
- (3) the musical setting includes instrumental accompaniment – as opposed to recitation, which is strictly unaccompanied.

[...] Qawwali shares with other light classical songs a certain musical flexibility that allows for musical enhancement by means of the technique of classical music but also for adaptations from popular and folk songs. (Qureshi 1986, 46–47)

The primary role of the text over music, the formal strophic structure with refrain, the instrumental accompaniment, and the range of flexibility between folk and classical music are some of the distinguishable elements that we also find in the Gurbani kirtan repertoire. Thus, in regard to the construction of the song form, qawwali and Gurbani kirtan share common traits. Given the diversity of

the spiritual and literary context, there are also some historical aspects to be considered.

As stated earlier, in ancient accounts, the origin of qawwali and khyal is both credited to Amir Khusrau. In his works, Khusrau does not mention qawwali nor khyal, but – as Saeed suggests (2008, 226) – the word qaul appears in Khusrau's writings as a poetical/ musical genre of his times and not specifically as something that he invented or composed. It is likely that Khusrau popularized a pre-extant song form. Miller (1999, 146) sees the origin of qawwali in a form of sung poetry (chaharbaiti, quatrains) popular in the region of Khorasan during in the twelve century.⁴⁵ We may hypothesize that the genre migrated with Moinuddin Chishti,⁴⁶ the founder of the Sufi order Chishtiya tariqa (mystical way), who moved from Khorasan to India in 1192, and died in Ajmer in 1233. Moinuddin Chishti's successor was Fariduddin Ganj-e-Shakar (1173–1266)⁴⁷ who is commonly known as Baba Farid. His verses have been included in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib complied by Guru Arjan and are still today part of the Gurbani and the qawwali repertoire. The so-called Farid-bani consists of a small corpus of 112 shaloks and four short hymns. In Shackle's analysis (2012, 13), most of the Farid's shaloks are in the metrical form of the doha, composed of four short half verses (which is an interesting element of comparison with the chaharbaiti quatrains of Khorasani origin).

On the basis of this typical feature of the Farid shaloks, it may be suggested that there was a particular association between south-western Punjabi and the early Sufi literary tradition. [...] This would be a further illustration of the characteristic association of languages of particular regions with the verse literatures of the various religious traditions of the medieval period. (2012, 14)

Although the Farid-bani has been preserved in oral and written sources (not shorn of questions about its authorship and authenticity), its musical form could hardly be reconstructed.

The purpose of exploring outside ‘the box’ of Gurbani literature – as Shackle’s quote seems also to suggest – is to think in a broader way about the musical and cultural context in which the Sikh Gurus’ repertoire arose and developed. If we look at the map of North West India ([Figure 7](#)) in the span of time between the fifteenth and the eighteenth century, we may better locate and distinguish the Gurbani kirtan tradition amid other existing genres. Among them, we find the haveli and darbari dhrupad, early regional forms of khyl, the qaul, and the early qawwali. The latter are associated with the Indic Sufi movement that had its roots in the Eastern Persian culture.

A note on the rabab

Another interesting connection to explore is the history of rabab in the Persian and Sikh music tradition. As evidenced from the seventh century CE in Middle Eastern literature, rabab is also mentioned in Persian, Sufi, and Sikh literature. In Arabic, rabab indicates an ‘instrument played with a bow’ and generally refers to a category of folk spike fiddles. It is important to note that – compared to the homonym Middle Eastern instrument – the Persian and Sikh versions of rabab are not fiddles (nor rebec) but fretless, plucked lutes, carved out of a single piece of wood. The resonator of these instruments is covered by a goatskin, and the melodic gut-strings are played using a plucking technique.

Remarkably, Amīr Khusrau, in a section of his *Rasa'il ul i jaz*, mentions a tournament between Hindustani and Khorasani musicians, at the end of which the Khorasani musicians ‘bowed obeisance as do the hind-peg of rabab’ ([Sarmadee 2003](#), 454). Khusrau also describes rabab as follows: Take for instance rubab. Its kasa is covered with nothing inside and outside except a patch of dried skin and a few dried veins (gut-strings). But when we ‘cup our hands’ before its ‘patched-up’ kasa, we pour ‘food for our soul’ in every heart endowed with taste. Do not please take us like those Rubabiyas who ‘cup their hands’ like a begging bowl before everyone till

the same refuses to ‘be cupped’ on the face of their own rubabs. (2003, 451)

From Khusrau’s account, we learn that during his time, the instrument was played by Persian and Indian musicians. The author himself played the rabab, and in his opinion the performance was meant for connoisseurs and devotees. It is very significant that the image Khusrau uses for the musician’s hand gesture is a cup-shape (like holding a plectrum between the fingers), which in a reversed upward position looks like a begging hand, with the meaning that the music played by rabab in the Sufi milieu was designed for a spiritual purpose, and not for earning money.

Although the number of strings is not specified, the instrument described by Khusrau shows a link between the ancient Persian rabab and the medieval Indian version of the instrument. According to Allyn Miner (1997, 62), the Indian rabab as represented in Moghul paintings is a unique type of instrument. During the period of Guru Nanak and Tansen (late fifteenth to early seventeenth century), the instrument was also known as dhrupadi rabab, clearly associated with the dhrupad esthetics and repertoire of the time. In this regard, Miner observes:

If the Persian rabab followed a course similar to the tanbur of the same period, it was gradually modified from its Persians origins to suit aesthetics tastes which were shaped by dhrupad music. (1997, 62)

Rabab is the first instrument of the Sikh tradition, played by Bhai Mardana to accompany Guru Nanak’s kirtan on his sonic and spiritual journey. In his Sharmaya-i-ishrat (1884, 283), Sadiq Ali Khan mentions that Bhai Mardana’s rabab presented six melodic silk strings, in place of the five strings made of gut in use at the time. Sadiq Ali Khan has probably seen Bhai Mardana’s instrument as, according to some sources,⁴⁸ this rabab was preserved in Patna until in 1984 when it was destroyed during the riots against the local Sikh community.

It seems that Indian rabab evolved in the course of the seventeenth century, adding new strings and 'pathos' (hazin) to its sound. By 1666, when Faqirullah completed his treatise, the dhrupadi rabab developed with 6 gut-strings plus 18 sympathetic metal- strings that were meant to enhance the hazin of a new genre called khyal.

A rabab with similar features, attributed to Guru Gobind Singh⁴⁹ is presently preserved in Mandi. This lute presents in fact 6 melodic strings and 15 sympathetic strings, showing similarities with the rabab, and the musical dramatic esthetical quality, described by Faqirullah.

Schaeffner (1936) maintained that musical instruments represent a tangible testimony of past traditions. The rabab, its history and evolution, could hence be used as a metaphor to illustrate the cross-pollination between cultures. On the other hand, it shows how, beyond these influences, each tradition developed autonomous repertoires and esthetics that fitted the related ideologies and literatures.

Conclusion: Gurbanı sangit an independent tradition?

Music defines and reaffirms the identity of social, religious, and ethnic groups. Cultural identity is reinforced and kept alive by means of organized vocal and instrumental sounds, which support and convey traditional values.

The modern musical system proposed by Bhatkhande at the beginning of the twentieth century brought about a radical change in the Indian music scenario (Bakhle 2006). In the span of a few generations, the national idiom dramatically impacted – and in some cases erased – local traditions. Bhatkhande's work was part of a wider educational reform that aimed to create a state pedagogical system, sacrificing ethnic and religious diversity in music upon the altar of a new Indian national tradition.

To paraphrase Žižek (2008) and Bhogal (2014), the imposed introduction of a new musical system was a form of objective and institutionalized violence that slowly silenced the voice of ancient traditions, rearranging them according to the dominant national model. Since Partition, the Gurbani kirtan repertoire has been revised in the light of the criteria established by the Hindustani Sangit Paddhati (lit. North Indian music system), neglecting the medieval and early modern idiom peculiar to the Gurbani sangit. Thus, the Gurbani compositions that were newly created or re-arranged after 1947 do not reflect the original idiom and esthetics of the Sikh Gurus' music tradition. And this is the reason why the corpus of compositions transmitted within the lineage of old kirtanis (like those of Bhai Jwala Singh, for instance) are extremely precious, since they are a surviving testimony of the pre-Partition repertoire. Interestingly, most of these compositions are structured in the fourfold medieval dhrupad form, sharing common traits with coeval traditions such as the haveli and darbari dhrupad. It should be noted that the ancient repertoire also includes compositions in the khyal form but, as Brown (2010) argued, the existing khyal of the seventeenth century had different musical features and esthetics, compared to the modern-day form based on Bhatkhande's criteria.

It is crucial to understand that the adoption of Bhatkhande's system marked the beginning of a new era, when a national musical culture replaced pre-extant traditions. One effect of this change is that nowadays the line that distinguishes different genres (such as the Sikh kirtan, Hindu bhajan, classical khayal bandis, or even a Sufi qawwali) appears blurred. Differences among genres are no longer based on the peculiar musical idioms, but rather on external elements such as lyrics, language, context, and function of performance. Some of the common musical features found in their con-temporary renditions are:

- restricted number of talas (khyal based);
- use of ragas' grammar as defined by Bhatkhande;
- tans (vocal ornamentations as used in khayal);
- sargam (solfeggio);

- use of instruments developed in the eighteenth–nineteenth century (such as sitar, harmonium, and tabla).⁵⁰ With the result being that most of the repertoires are played with a standard range of instruments, timbres, melodies, and rhythms.

This paper aimed rather to illustrate the diversity and richness of musical idioms, instruments, and repertoires extant during the Sikh Gurus era, and their mutual influences. It focused in particular on four genres (Gurbani dhurpad-form of kirtan, haveli dhrupad, early khyal, and qawwali), as means of distinct spiritual paths. In this context, the Gurbani kirtan tradition developed its own identity which served the Sikh ideology and literature. Its repertoire is distinguished by unique talas and ragas, which support the spiritual message, constituting a complete and coherent idiom.

In regard to the rhythmic aspect, the Indian musicologist S.K. Saxena shared with me his admiration for the ancient school of percussion of the Sikh Gurus' tradition, and its rhythmic constructions:

Not only are the rhythmic patterns played on the drums important, but the recitation is just as relevant and fascinating. The intellect of those who designed such patterns is amazing⁵¹

The most intriguing aspect of the talas played in the Gurbani tradition is its intrinsic relationship with the quantitative meter of the poetical structure. We may argue that the language and the poetical structure of Gurbani (pada) contributed to the generation of a vast array of talas that served the lyrics and their spiritual message.⁵² This is particularly evident in the case of special compositions that in the SGGS fall under the definition of partal. Partals are a unique feature of the Gurbani musical repertoire and consist of a sequence of different rhythmic cycles within a single song. As described by Bhai Gurcharan Singh (2008, 36), partal is an original contribution of the fourth Sikh master Guru Ram Das.

In Gurbanī many hymns are under the heading of 'partaal'. Such hymns have very strange compositions and Sat Guru Ram Das ji had himself started the practice of singing partaals. During the singing of these hymns, tals are changed. And the way of singing these hymns is also very strange and special, which has not been heard of from other singers. These days some ragis have got the impression that only change in taal is the name of partaal and every hymn could be sung like this. This is not true. Only hymns under the heading of partaal can be sung as partaal.

In the SGGS, there are 55 partals, in 13 different ragas.⁵³ According to Bhai Baldeep Singh, the partals represent a form of 'dhrupad at the higher stage of evolution' (2001, 20). In his analysis, every stanza is in fact set to a different poetical meter, for which Guru Ram Das had introduced a new system of singing using different tals in the four sections of the dhrupad composition (asthai, antara, sancari, and abhogh), but the partals transmitted to the present day are often composed of only two or three different rhythmic cycles.

In a later article, Singh (2011, 265) maintains that the rhythmic change of partals corresponds to a shift in the state of mind. In this key, the rhythmic patterns are in a logical sequence that reflects the structure and meaning of the stanzas. One of the best examples demonstrating this process is the sabad 'Man Japahu Ram Gopal', a partal by the fourth Master in raga Kanra ghar 5 (SGGS, 1296). In a famous rendition recorded by Bhai Avtar Singh, the ragi masterfully renders the composition, singing the first part (asthai) in slow chartal, and the stanzas in a drut fast ektal,⁵⁴ emphasizing the musical and emotional shift between the two parts of the sabad.

ਕਾਨੜਾ ਮਹਲਾ ੪ ਪੜਤਾਲ ਘਰੂ ਪੁ ॥ ਮਨ ਜਾਪਹੁ ਰਾਮ ਗੁਪਾਲ ॥

O my mind, remember- meditate on the Lord

ਹਰਿ ਰਤਨ ਜਵੇਹਰ ਲਾਲ ॥

Lord is the Jewel, the Diamond, the Ruby.

ਹਰਿ ਗੁਰਮੁਖਿ ਘੜਿ ਟਕਸਾਲ ॥

The Lord fashions the Gurmukhs in His Mint.

ਹਰਿ ਹੋ ਹੋ ਕਿਰਪਾਲ ॥੧॥ ਰਹਾਊ ॥

O Lord, please, please, be Merciful to me. ||1||Rahao||

**ਤੁਮਰੇ ਗੁਨ ਅਗਮ ਅਗੋਚਰ ਏਕ ਜੀਹ ਕਿਆ ਕਥੈ ਬਿਚਾਰੀ ਰਾਮ ਰਾਮ
ਰਾਮ ਰਾਮ ਲਾਲ ॥**

Your Glorious Virtues are inaccessible and unfathomable; how can my one poor tongue describe them? O my Beloved Lord, Raam, Raam, Raam, Raam.

**ਤੁਮਰੀ ਜੀ ਅਕਥ ਕਥਾ ਤੂ ਤੂ ਤੂ ਹੀ ਜਾਨਹਿ ਹਉ ਹਰਿ ਜਪਿ ਭਈ ਨਿਹਾਲ
ਨਿਹਾਲ ਨਿਹਾਲ ॥੧॥**

O Dear Lord, You, You, You alone know Your Unspoken Speech. I have become enraptured, enraptured, enraptured, meditating on the Lord. ||1||

**ਹਮਰੇ ਹਰਿ ਪ੍ਰਾਨ ਸਖਾ ਸੁਆਮੀ ਹਰਿ ਮੀਤਾ ਮੇਰੇ ਮਨਿ ਤਨਿ ਜੀਹ ਹਰਿ
ਹਰੇ ਹਰੇ ਰਾਮ ਨਾਮ ਧਨੁ ਮਾਲ ॥**

My God is friend of my life, he the dear God-master. In my mind, body and on my tongue, is only God and God. His name is my real wealth, real riches.

**ਜਾ ਕੋ ਭਾਗੁ ਤਿਨਿ ਲੀਓ ਗੀ ਸੁਹਾਗੁ ਹਰਿ ਹਰਿ ਹਰੇ ਹਰੇ ਗੁਨ ਗਾਵੈ
ਗੁਰਮਤਿ ਹਉ ਬਲਿ ਬਲੇ ਹਉ ਬਲਿ ਬਲੇ ਜਨ ਨਾਨਕ ਹਰਿ ਜਪਿ ਭਈ
ਨਿਹਾਲ ਨਿਹਾਲ ਨਿਹਾਲ ॥੨॥੧॥੨॥**

Nanak says, 'In the wisdom of Guru, the blessed soul sings: God, God, and God, I sacrifice myself, again and again, by remembering God'. 55

Not only does the rhythmic construction serve the lyrics of the hymns but, as raga Kanra illustrates, there was in the medieval idiom a deep connection between the melodic outline of the raga, the lyrics, and their effect on the psyche – what in the classical tradition was codified with the term ‘rasa’.⁵⁶ While it is a common belief that these basic principles of Indian music have been kept alive within the dhrupad idiom, the raga-rasa connection got lost in the contemporary repertoires, along with the correct grammar of music.

Just as with talas, the repertoire of peculiar ragas prescribed in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib represents a unique feature of the medieval Gurbani tradition. There are in fact some ragas not presently found in any other music tradition, such as ragas Vadhans, Majh, Tukhari, Mali Gaura, and Gauri-Bairagan. These ragas may represent an authentic contribution of the Sikh masters, and their melodic outlines constitute a unity with the lyrics of the hymns. In this perspective, the ancient compositions are particularly significant, as they contain the grammar of the medieval music tradition, with precious information about the ancient forms of the ragas.

As Bhai Baldeep Singh suggests, the etymology of the word dhur-pada (Dhur-ki-bani) reveals the ideology and the music idiom peculiar to the Sikh Gurus’ tradition. Comparing historical data, we may hypothesize that the medieval Gurbani dhur-pada form of kirtan was coeval with, if not preceding, the haveli dhrupad (Visnu-pada),⁵⁷ as well as the darbari (classical) dhrupad, which developed with Tansen, the legendary singer and composer at the court of Akbar. Interestingly, Tansen is also credited as the musician who popularized the dhrupadi rabab in India; however, the instrument already existed in the Sikh tradition since Guru Nanak’s time. And another element that identifies Gurbani kirtan as a genre is the peculiar instrumental tradition that lasted until the beginning of the twentieth century. In the category of chordophones, we find the rabab, the taus, the saranda, and the dilruba, while among the membranophones there are ancient drums such as the pakhawaj and the

jori-pakhawaj⁵⁸ (the latter considered an original creation of Guru Arjan). The sonic identity of Gurbani kirtan is thus shaped through the sabad (lyrics), the raga, the tala, as well as the timbre and playing technique of the instruments, defining a distinct tradition within the Indian music culture.

On the basis of these elements, it is time to reconsider the history of Indian music from a standpoint that includes Gurbani sangit as an independent tradition, based on its peculiar idiom and repertoire, rather than a regional version of classical genres such as dhruvapad and khyal.⁵⁹

The SGGS is itself evidence of an existing corpus of ragas and compositions practiced since the late fifteenth century, a coherent musical repertoire so unique and important as to become the criterion for indexing the entire Sikh holy scripture, the living spiritual authority of the Sikh community.

In conclusion, I would like to leave the reader with a picture of the medieval and early modern scenario of Indian music ([figure 7](#)) in which Gurbani sangit played an important role, being the expression of one of the major faiths of North India. Much of the oral tradition was lost in the twentieth century, when dramatic events affected the Sikh community with unavoidable consequences for the strategies of production and perception of the Gurbani musical repertoire. However, the mosaic of the past tradition can be reconstructed and revived, intertwining the available data (the unique musical corpus of compositions, ragas and talas, and the peculiar instruments) with the metamusical discourses (written and oral sources). The objective of this research is to reestablish the original Gurbani music idiom and the dhurvpad-based kirtan form, not only as testimony of the Sikh heritage, but also an example of the cultural diversity within the medieval and early modern context of Indian music.

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Notes

(1) The term Gurbani Sangit is employed here to define the medieval and early modern Sikh tradition and its musical idiom. The word Gurbani has been in use since the time of Guru Nanak (late fifteenth century), and in this script it is intentionally distinguished from Gurmat Sangit, an expression introduced in the early twentieth century and popularized in the 1990s. The word Gurmat literally means Guru's wisdom, and refers to the Sikh doctrine, not to the musical practice. Thus, the two terms are radically different, and it seems inappropriate to use the word Gurmat in regard to the musical aspect. According to Bhai Baldeep Singh, Gurmat Sangit is an expression better applied to contemporary kirtan performances that are not based on the medieval idiom. (Personal communication with Bhai Baldeep Singh, Monterey, January 2015.)

(2) In the Sri Guru Granth Sahib are included hymns of 15 mystics who predated or lived during Guru Nanak's era. Among them are the Sufi mystic Sheikh Farid (1173–1266), Bhagat Namdev (1270–1350), Bhagat Kabir (1440–1518), and Bhagat Ravidas (1399–1528).

(3) As also Singh suggests (2006), the establishment of these eight sessions may have been influenced by the ceremonies performed among the Vaisnava community, in which the "eight orders" of darsanas (the acts of seeing the divine) reflect the subdivision of the day in eight pahars (Indian unit of time equal to three hours).

(4) The hymns of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS) are set to 31 main ragas and their 31 varieties (mishrat ragas). The main ragas are (1) Sri Raga, (2) Majh, (3) Gauri, (4) Asa, (5) Gujarī, (6) Devgandhari, (7) Bihagra, (8) Wadhans, (9) Sorath, (10) Dhanasri, (11) Jaitsri, (12) TodI, (13) Bairari, (14) Tilang, (15) SuhI, (16) Bilaval, (17) Gond, (18) Ramkali, (19) Nat Narain, (20) Mali Gaura, (21) Maru, (22) Tukhari, (23) Kedar, (24)

Bhairo, (25) Basant, (26) Sarang, (27) Malhar, (28) Kanra, (29) Kalyan, (30) Parbhati, and (31) Jaijavanti.

(5) One of the latest books, Hindustani Music. Thirteenth to Twentieth Century (Bor et al. 2010), has a large section dedicated to medieval and devotional repertoires, in which the Sikh kirtan tradition is not even named.

(6) A fundamental impulse in this direction, as well as in the definition of the Sikh musical renaissance, has been given by Bhai Baldeep Singh, who started a pioneering research with the purpose of identifying and reviving authentic elements of Gurbani tradition, such as the grammar of the ragas and talas, the stylistic rendition of compositions, the peculiar performance techniques, and luthiery. A sincere quest to revive the musical repertoire and the authentic instruments of the Sikh Gurus' era in fact led Bhai Baldeep Singh to extend his activity to musical philology, musicology, and luthiery, bringing about a personal and innovative contribution to the study of Gurbani Sangit. Since the end of the 1980s, he traveled in remote areas of Punjab, Pakistan, and Rajasthan, to find and document living masters who had the memory of past musical practice, previous to Bhatkhande's influence. During his fieldwork, Bhai Baldeep Singh not only documented what in ethnomusicology might be defined a tradition 'in danger of disappearing', but also had the rare opportunity to receive talim (musical education) from old traditional masters, becoming a living recipient of the (vocal, instrumental, and percussion) maryada and an exponent of contemporary musicology.

(7) In 2011, the Sardarni Harbans Kaur Chair in Sikh Musicology was established at Hofstra University (New York), with the aim of promoting the study of the Sikh kirtan tradition according to international academic standards. The author of this article has the honor of serving in this position since the installment of the Chair.

(8) In Indian music, the medieval period covers the span of time between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries. After the sixteenth

century begins the modern period, which scholars have divided into two parts, separated by the second half of the eighteenth century (Powers). Thus, while the Gurbani kirtan repertoire, composed and performed during the time of the first five Sikh Gurus, is part of the so-called medieval music literature, the repertoire after the sixteenth century belongs to the early modern era of Indian music.

(9) For a discussion about the role of *kirtanie* (plural of *kirtania*), see also Singh (2011) and Cassio (2014).

(10) In this regard, Singh writes [in the SGGS] no talas are mentioned, though many scholars have attempted unsubstantiated equations of the mystery term *ghar* with the *tala*. Seventeen ghars are mentioned as part of the raga headings to the hymns in gurbani. The term *tala* for rhythmic pattern has been used extensively in gurbani by the authors. There is no reason why they would use a separate term for defining something for which a particular term was already in vogue.

(11) According to aur, (2011, 279) The guidelines derived above from the sabad-texts and sabad-titles of the Guru Granth in fact indicate a musical style that is distinct from the contemporary Hindustani genres – dhrupad, khyal, thumri, ghazal, and filmi. [...] Genres that did exist then [at Sikh Guru's time], such as the dhrupad, have, like almost all music, undergone much change over the course of centuries, and the original forms are difficult to know, for they were not notated either. (2011, 308) In contrast with Kaur's work, my research focuses on *kirtan* as a genre (not a style), comparing the Gurbani tradition with coeval genres such as the haveli and darbari dhrupad, khyal, and qawwali. Although these traditions were transmitted orally, their idioms and aesthetics did not change significantly over time, and for this reason they constitute a precious source for reconstructing the context of the medieval music culture.

(12) 12 Hindustani Sangit Paddhati literally means the system (paddhati) of North Indian music. Between 1910 and 1932, Bhatkhande published a treatise of the same name in six volumes (Bhatkhande Engl. Transl. 1999). This book is still considered the fundamental text for the standard practice of North Indian classical music.

(13) In Singh's opinion:A researcher must possess the ability to discriminate or distinguish between a contemporary composer's composition and a vintage sabad-reet composed by the gurus or other legendary kirtaniyas, particularly because attempts have been made recently to alter and even corrupt the history of gurbani kirtan. New musical instruments and even new ragas have been created and allotted to the gurbani authors posthumously. (2011, 269)

(14) The term ragi designates a Sikh musician who is expert in singing the sabads (hymns) from the Sikh Gurus' tradition, according to the prescribed ragas indicated in the SGGS. And in a broader sense, this term is used to indicate a professional singer who serves in the Gurdwaras. The term rababi literally designates a category of Muslim musicians expert in playing the rabab. The rabab is a fretless lute, originally played by Bhai Mardana (1459–1534), who accompanied Guru Nanak (1469–1539) in his spiritual and sonic journeys. It is thus considered the first instrument of the Sikh tradition. Over time, the term rababi designated not only a category of accompanists, but in general all Muslim musicians (singers and instrumentalists) who performed kirtan at the Golden Temple in Amritsar, and at other historical Sikh places of worship before Partition (1947). For a reference about the recent history of the rababi tradition, see Purepal (2011, 365–382).

(15) 15 Interview recorded in Sultanpur Lodhi, 22 August 2013.

(16) A controversial issue is, for instance, Paintal's recent statement about the ragas, whose performance, according to the scholar, should follow the rules prescribed in the modern literature of Hindustani classical

music. A problematic assessment, if we think that some ragas and forms peculiar to the SGGS (such as partal, to be discussed in the conclusion) are not part of the classical Hindustani repertoire.

(17) 'In ethnomusicology, the concept [of authenticity] implies ages and stability in a musical tradition belonging uniquely to one culture' (New Harvard Dictionary of Music 2003, 66).

(18) The term 'authenticity' has been used in several senses relating to music. The most common use refers to classes of performance that might synonymously be termed 'historically informed' or 'historically aware', or employing 'period' or 'original' instruments and techniques' (Butt 2001). 'Authenticity'. Grove Music Online. www.grovemusic.com.

(19) 19 In this regard, Nattiez affirms that the natives' discourse on music is not 'the music'. It is a meta-language and a testimony.

(20) The semiology of music is a discipline that examines music as a language, through a heuristic approach to signs and their interpretations. With regard to the 'strategies of production' and 'strategies of perception', in his Music and Discourse (1990, 67) Nattiez establishes some basic criteria to analyze a music culture and its repertoires. Sound is an irreducible given of music. The 'musical' is any sonorous fact constructed, organized or thought by a culture. There are no a priori limits on the numbers of different interpreters that producers or interpreters might associate with a given sound complex. No semiology of music is possible without taking into account the cultural environment of the phenomenon being studied. A semiological analysis ensues from combining categories and articulations proper to the culture, with a description of the immanent characteristics (analysis of the neutral level) in the sound phenomena under consideration.

(21) Quoted in Rowell (1987, 158).

(22) 'By about the fifteenth century, when the prabandhas became too stereotyped and effete and as such lost their popular appeal, a simplified derivation of prabandhas emerged in the form of dhrupad.' (Srivastava 1980, 8)

(23) The sentence continues as follows: 'I think that this happened for two reasons: first: that once dhrupada came to the fore, the ragas and the song forms pertaining to the marga style lagged behind. Except for, of course, such ragas which had developed no languidity'.

(24) The Talwandi gharana of the late Mohammed Hafiz Khan has been documented through an extensive fieldwork and analysis by Khalid Basra (1996) and Bhai Baldeep Singh.

(25) Interview recorded in Rome (Italy), January 2013.

(26) Interview video recorded in New Delhi, 8 December 2012. Prof. Saxena passed a few months later, in March 2013.

(27) 'It is notable that even though dhrupad was the dominant genre during the time that the Adi Granth (first version of Guru Granth) was compiled (1604), it finds no mention in it.' (Kaur 2011, 311)

(28) In his 1978s article, Paintal wrote: it is, therefore, clear that to preserve the Sikh devotional music, particularly the Sabad Reets and the various Dhunis, the Sikh Gurus employed professional kirtan singers, that is, Rababis, Ragis, and Dhadhis, who received traditional training in the kirtan from their teachers (Ustad) and this traditional method of training of the pupil by the teacher continues to this day. This has enabled them to preserve the traditional Sabad compositions for posterity. [...] Mention may also be made of the peculiar style of singing by the Rababis and the Ragis of Amritsar. Their voice is cultivated and trained in a special way. The characteristic features of their style are that they display all the graces with lively combinations of Swaras (notes), rendered in a slightly rounded form, which has a wonderful effect.

(29) On this topic also Khalsa (2012).

(30) Interview video recorded by the author in New Delhi, 8 August 2012. (1978, 261)

(31) A rag is embodied in the form of a dhurpad composition, which is a self-contained entity. An authentic dhurpad composition contains grammatical codes and essential structural features which characterize the rag in question, and musicians trained in the family music, who possesses nigah (sight, vision, developed musical sensibility), should be able to derive all the rules involved in the structure of the rag from the relevant dhurpad composition. [...] Authentic compositions are presented as proof of a rag's structure. (Basra 1996 in Sanyal and Widdess 2004, 211)

(32) For a reference, the example of raga Malhar is also mentioned by Ustad Vilayat Khan: I had an opportunity to listen to the kirtan of Bhai Sahib Bhai Avtar Singh and Gurcharan Singh Ragi while attending the marriage ceremony of a friend's son at Chandigarh. They recited the PARTALS of RAGAS Suhi and Malhar in the most original and ancient way of classical singing. (Singh, Bhai Avtar and Bhai Gurcharan 1995, vi)

(33) Part of the repertoire sung by the two legendary kirtanie was notated and published in the two-volume Gurbani Sangit Prachin Rit Ratnavali (Patiala University, 1979), and was recorded by the two musicians in several sessions, since they believed that Bhatkhande's notation would not be sufficient to show the nuances of the ragas and the peculiarities of the compositions.

(34) Interview recorded in Amritsar, 29 August 2013.

(35) Amir Khusrau is also considered the legendary musician who invented tabla and sitar, instruments which actually only appear in iconographical and written sources in a later period. For instance, tabla and sitar are not mentioned in the A'in-i-Akbari (c. 1590).

(36) Baqir Khan Najm-i Sani was a nobleman who served Akbar's son and grandson, Jahan-gir (1569–1627) and Shah Jahan (1592–1666). Famous for a book on the etiquette of rulers he wrote for Jahangir, Baqir Khan Najm-i Sani was considered by his contemporary Shaikh Farid Bhakkari a patron of 'dhrupad and khyal [compositions] in the Hindawi language composed in raga' (Brown 2010, 161).

(37) The first description of khyal as a desi (regional, popular) genre is in fact in the musical treatise written in 1666 by Nawaj Saif Khan, better known as Faqirullah, a scholar and a former administrator of the Aurangazeb's empire. Faqirullah's work has a central importance for the history of Hindustani music. His translation (tarjuma) of Raja Man Singh Tomar's Manakutuhala provides important information about the history of dhrupad, and its shift from the devotional genre to the darbari form in the court of Gwalior. But it is through the Risala-i-Ragadarapana (Faqirullah's original work based on previous treatises and on his firsthand experience) that we have access to crucial data about instruments, genres and repertoires practiced during Aurangazeb's reign. Faqirullah dedicates an entire section to the analysis and description of dhrupad, that he regarded as a class by itself in which 'the text and song-forms, of Marga and Desi varieties, have been made to synthesize with each other and act as one has been a feat of wonder-weaving' (Faqirullah [Engl. transl.] [1666] 1996, 99). This section is followed by a description of the other forms and styles less popular than dhrupad. Among them, Faqirullah mentions the chautukla, a song-form in two parts credited to be an invention of the ruler of Jaunpur Sultan Husain Sharqi (d. 1505), which in later sources is considered to be an archaic form of khyal. Faqirullah's list includes also: Qaul, Tarana, Khayal Naqshnigar, Basit, Tilallana and Sohila are the popular song-forms of Delhi. Their ravish (style) has been a creation of Amir Khusrau. (Faqirullah [Engl. transl.] [1666] 1996, 101)

(38) Ni'mat Khan was employed at the court of two Mughal emperors: Aurangazeb's grandson Moizuddin Jahandar Shah (r. 1712–13), and at the court of Muhammad Shah 'Rangila' (r. 1719–1748).

(39) In his *Tuhfat al-Hind* (c. 1675), Mirza Khan attributes the invention of khyal to Husain Shah Sharqui (Sultan of Jaunpur in the years 1458–1483). In addition, Mirza Khan considers cutkula (chautukla) a form of khyal. Khyal is an Arabic word. [...] (This genre) It is in two tuk; its inventor was Sutan Husain Sharqui, the emperor of Jaunpur, and it is mostly (now) in the language of Khairabad. [...] If it has one tuk it is called cutkula.

(40) English translation from <http://www.sridasam.org>. (Brown 2010, 167)

(41) According to Singh, in the context of this sabad, the word 'khyal' stands for 'the first thought (khyal) that Guru Gobind Singh had upon hearing the news of the martyrdom of his sons – value it, imagine – that moment!' (recorded during the 24th biannual Gurbani kirtan Intensive Retreat held in Espanola, July 2009).

(42) In this regard, I would suggest investigating the folk and Sufi tradition, in order to verify whether the musical forms described in the ancient texts are still extant in the region. In regard to the discussion about the adoption of khyal:

(43) Dr Paintal as well as two other Sikh musicians who served on the RNC, Pandit Tejpal and Surinder Singh Bandhu, were students of renowned Hindustani classical musician and khyal exponent, Ustad Amir Khan (Lucknow gharana). They hold similar beliefs that Sikh ragas should be based on those used in classical Hindustani sangeet. Their shared perspective illustrates the fact that they had not been taught by those Rababi or Kirtaniya-Ragis who remembered how the ragas were rendered by the Gurbani Kirtan parampara, but instead were trained in Hindustani classical music. (Khalsa 2012, 212)

(44) In Qureshi's words: 'Through the act of listening –sama' – the Sufi seeks to activate his link with his spiritual guide, with saints departed, and ultimately with God' (1986, 1).

(45) According to Miller (1999, 145) 'The dobeiti, which is termed chaharbaiti in Afghanistan as well as some regional areas of Iran such as Khorasan, is a popular form of the roba'i used by the dervish poet Baba Taher of Hamadan.'

(46) Also popularly known as Gharib Nawaz (the protector of the poor).

(47) Amir Khusrau was the beloved disciple of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya (1238–1325), who was the direct successor of Baba Farid.

(48) Information reported in the notes of the CD Dhrupadi Rabab. 2004. New Delhi: Anad Records.

(49) The instrument is presently preserved at the Sri Guru Gobind Singh Gurdwara of Mandi (Himachal Pradesh).

(50) For a reference, Miner 1997.

(51) This interview was taken on 18 August 2012 in New Delhi.

(52) In this regard also Kaur affirms: 'Tal designations are not given in sabad titles because the tal for a particular sabad would be determined by the meter of the sabad text.' (2011, 306)

(53) The fifty five partals are in the following ragas: five in Asa; two in Dhanasri, Ramkali, and Prabhati-bibhas; three in Suhī, Bilaval, and Nat; one in Nat Narayan, Prabhati, and Bhairao; sixteen in Sarang; ten in Malar; and six in Kanra.

(54) This composition is notated at page 837 of the Gurbani Sangit Prachin Rit Ratnavali, and recorded by Avtar Singh in the album Gurbani Kirtan Parampara. Prem Piri, Vol. 2, published by T Series in 2004.

(55) Translation, as appears in <http://www.searchgurbani.com>, except for the last verse, translated by Darshan Singh 2005.

(56) About the raga-rasa theory applied to the Gurbani repertoire, see Lallie/Kaur/Singh (2012).

(57) The legendary Swami Haridas (1480–1575) died at the time of Guru Ram Das.

(58) The first (and only) album of jori pakhawaj solo was recorded by Bhai Baldeep Singh in 2004, published by Anad Records Pvt Ltd.

(59) An important remark in this regard by Singh: While over the last century-and-a-half, most North-Indian classical music and Carnatic music exponents and their works have been documented extensively, Gurbani kirtan tradition exponents died in virtual anonymity. While the overblown contribution of Indian classical musicians ensures they enjoy cult-like status, the stories of the legends of gurbani kirtan are almost totally absent. The silence about the Gur-Sikh music and musicians in the history books ensures that aspirants have no role models, no references and hence, no pride or dignity.

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Author

Francesca Cassio.

Address: Sardarni Harbans Kaur Chair in Sikh Musicology,
Music Department,
Hofstra University, 102 New Academic Building,
160 Hempstead,
New York 11549,
USA. [email: francesca.cassio@hofstra.edu]